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Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton today announced an encompassing decision on the controversy involving leases and exploratory permits for coal development on the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation in Montana.

The Northern Cheyenne Tribe petitioned the Secretary in January 1974 to withdraw the Department's approval of leases and exploratory permits for strip mining of coal on about 214,000 acres of the 433,740-acre reservation.

The decision announced by the Secretary today grants the petition in part.; denies it in part; refers some questions to the Department's Office of Hearings and Appeals; and holds some decisions in abeyance.

As an alternative, the decision allows the Tribe to sue the coal companies involved with the support of the Secretary on any and all issues, or with the support of the Secretary to request the Justice Department to bring suit in the name of the Northern Cheyenne against the coal companies on the issues.

Secretary Morton said the decision was a necessarily complex resolution on the issues presented in the Tribe's petition.

"Although many of the allegations of invalidity were similar, each of the three coal sales and each of the leases and permits involved different circumstances and issues," he said.

"My decision, therefore, does not grant or deny the petition LIS 8 whole, nor can it be the final disposition of all the issues raised by the Tribe. Rather, I believe it establishes the essential framework for an eventual determination which will be equitable.

Various requests by companies holding coal exploratory permits on the reservation to go to lease on some of these permits and to renew some permits are also pending before the Department. The decision announced today also deals with these requests.